

Oceans Apart? The UK & the Pacific: Partnerships & Shared Values

Tēnā koutou katoa.

Thank you for the invitation to address such an illustrious audience this evening. The New Zealand Institute of International Affairs plays a hugely valuable role in exposing and debating the international issues of our day. And it is a privilege to be addressing the Auckland branch for the first time, and on this topic – not least as Auckland is, very proudly, the biggest Pasifika city in the world.

My job this evening is to talk – no pressure – about the UK and the Pacific. Given that the Pacific spans almost a third of the globe, and is made up of a multiplicity of individual states and territories, each with their own culture, history, politics and beliefs, it is no small task.

So I'd like to start with a disclaimer: that while I will refer to "the Pacific" as a shorthand for the region, the UK absolutely recognises the sheer diversity and complexity of the region. The experience of Pitcairn and Pitcairners is completely different from those of the people of Papua New Guinea and Fiji. The outlook of a Tongan will differ from that of someone from Nouvelle Calédonie. So the UK's strong bilateral relationships with our Pacific partners form the bedrock of our role in this region. And I hope you will take my comments on "The Pacific" in that context, and in that spirit – just as I hope you will forgive my best attempt at Pacific attire. So: disclaimers over.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the UK and the Pacific sit on opposite sides of the globe – we are quite literally oceans apart.

At first glance, you would expect those oceans, the geographical distance, the differences in size and economy, to result in shallower relationships.

But in fact, the opposite is the case. While the distance is great, the connections are close. We have more in common than that which sets us apart. We are all island nations with long seafaring traditions. We have strong historical connections. We are nations built on the shared values of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance. We are – many of us – members of the Commonwealth.

And we all share a commitment to finding global solutions to global problems. To working with and through the Rules-Based International Order. And to working together to address the existential threat that is climate change, and to protect and preserve our oceans.

Pacific Uplift

Let me talk first about the UK's Pacific Uplift.

Historical connections between UK and Pacific Islands are many and varied. Three Pacific Island nations are Realm countries (Tuvalu, PNG & Solomon Islands – in addition of course to Australia and New Zealand), nine are fellow members of the Commonwealth, and our connections – for good or ill – stem from Captain Cook's first voyage through the Pacific 250 years ago. This was one of the far-flung corners of the British Empire and – whatever we may think of the Empire and its legacy, and that is surely a topic for another speech – the ties that are left are strong. A shared language, shared legal system, and critical, modern day security connections: for example the hundreds of Fijian soldiers who serve with pride and distinction in the British Army. And then there are also the more unusual legacies – such as the fact that the Duke of Edinburgh is regarded as a living deity on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu.

So the UK has long been in and of the Pacific. But in the 2000s, we scaled down our presence. We remained present and engaged in Fiji, PNG and the Solomon Islands, and covered other Pacific countries from non-resident accreditations – as I currently cover Samoa. But we closed our High Commissions in Vanuatu and Tonga. And quite frankly we stepped back too much from our Pacific friends and partners.

We are now beginning to put that balance right. While New Zealand has its 'Pacific Reset' and Australia has its 'Step Up', for the last year the UK has been pursuing our 'Pacific Uplift' strategy. This will see us open three new High Commissions, in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu later this year. That is a doubling of our diplomatic presence in the region. We have also doubled our team in Fiji, with new roles on development, trade, oceans, regional organisations and programmes.

And I am delighted to say that our Deputy High Commissioner to Samoa, Rob Contractor, is already in role, and in Apia as I speak. He is double hatted: Deputy High Commissioner Samoa, and Deputy Consul General Auckland, with a particular remit to enhance our relationships with the Pasifika of New Zealand. As we increase our presence we are considering – and consulting on – where we should focus our increased engagement in the Pacific, in a way that most furthers the interests of our Pacific partners, speaks to our shared agendas, and complements rather than duplicates the work of other partners in the region: Australia and New Zealand, first and foremost, but others, too.

So what is our focus? I don't want to pre-empt the results of those consultations. And in the new posts – Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu – it will be for the new High Commissioners and their teams to determine their priorities, within a wider regional context.

But I can say now that it is a given, a no brainer, a non-negotiable – however you want to put it – that our shared values, climate change and oceans will be at the heart of our agenda. So let me take each of those in order.

Our shared values

So what are the shared values of the UK and the countries of the Pacific. I

would say the following: that we all believe in finding global solutions to global problems – and working with and through the Rules Based International Order.

We believe – as seafaring, trading nations – in freedom of navigation and secure shipping lanes, and in trade as a common good – as a driver of both prosperity and peace and stability.

We believe in democracy and the rule of law, good governance and human rights. And in the principle, enshrined at the UN, of equality amongst nations: that regardless of size or wealth, each country has an equal vote and an equal say on the world stage. That might is not right.

We believe in taking action to uphold the international rules – as we did collectively, in June last year, in reinforcing the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons at the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons – after chemical weapons were used in Salisbury, UK, and in Syria.

And we share a recognition that we live on a shared planet with finite, common resources that must be managed for the benefit of all: that we have a duty of kaitiakitanga, or guardianship, for our land and oceans.

The Commonwealth is a part of that Rules Based International Order, and is rooted in our shared values. As the current Commonwealth Chair in Office, the UK is focused in particular on increasing collaboration and cooperation on climate change, oceans, cyber security, and maximising intra-Commonwealth trade. The Commonwealth Trade Advantage – namely that trade between Commonwealth countries is about 19% cheaper than elsewhere – is relatively well known. But Commonwealth members are working hard to reduce non-tariff barriers between members – for example Vanuatu is leading the cooperation on “supply-side connectivity” across the Commonwealth membership with a focus on the agricultural sector – and the Commonwealth has also been actively supporting existing trade in the Pacific, not least through the Hub and Spokes II programme, which aims to help Fiji become a hub for trade and investment in the Pacific.

The Commonwealth is also active on human rights. With £1.8M UK funding, the Pacific Commonwealth Equalities Programme is working through the South Pacific Community to build capacity on human rights. And there have been smaller scale projects, too: in Samoa, for example, the Commonwealth Secretariat has supported the critical work of the National Ombudsman in documenting and communicating the problem of domestic violence.

Of course the UK’s work on values and human rights is not limited to work within the Commonwealth. This year we have launched a campaign, in partnership with Canada, to champion media freedom around the world – including in the Pacific. Media freedom plays an essential role in protecting all other human rights and freedoms. It is a vital foundation for any prosperous and healthy liberal democracy: in the UK, in the Pacific, and globally. To that end we are hosting a Global Conference for Media Freedom in London later this month.

Climate Change

I want to turn now to the existential challenge that is climate change. If you save Tuvalu, so the saying goes, you save the world. Pacific Island Nations have contributed minimally to the emissions that are causing global temperatures to rise. But they are on the front line of its impacts, in terms of temperature and sea level rises, and extreme weather events. And they are also in the vanguard in terms of championing urgent action to tackle climate change.

The UK, by contrast, led the world to wealth through fossil fuels in the Industrial Revolution, and has contributed in no small way to greenhouse gas emissions to date. So it is imperative that the UK now leads the drive in the opposite direction, in weaning ourselves off fossil fuels domestically, and in championing climate action internationally.

So it is a no-brainer (to use the technical term) that tackling climate change is a central plank of the partnership between the UK and its partners in the Pacific.

Last month, the UK became the first major economy to legislate for Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. That means emissions from homes, transport, farming and industry will have to be avoided completely or – in the most difficult examples – offset. This was in response to advice from the UK's Committee on Climate Change, which said that if other countries followed the UK, we would have a 50-50 chance of staying below the recommended 1.5C temperature rise by 2100. (You will know that a 1.5C rise is considered the threshold for dangerous climate change.)

The UK has led the way in reducing our domestic emissions, and in championing the low carbon economy. And this year we have gone almost three months without coal: finding our energy from renewable or other low-emission sources.

We are equally ambitious in terms of our international work to tackle climate change.

In December last year, the UK and New Zealand co-hosted a Wilton Park Forum on Climate Change and Resilience in the Pacific. The forum brought together leaders from the Pacific, development partners, civil society, academics and officials to consult on climate finance; the oceans / climate nexus; climate change and security; and climate change-related displacement and migration.

The UK is also putting its money where its mouth is. UK International Climate Finance expenditure in Pacific Island countries has amounted to approximately \$88 million since 2016. This has covered a range of areas including renewable energy and wastewater management, but has a particular focus on strengthening climate and risk resilience. We have also provided £9.6m of funding through the UK Space Agency's International Partnership Programme for CommonSensing, an innovative international project in partnership with Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to support and build climate resilience and enhance decision-making through the use of satellite remote sensing technology.

And we have contributed £1.4M for the Pacific Nationally Determined Contributions Hub to help Pacific countries implement their Paris Agreement commitments.

We take our global responsibilities seriously: as a member of the P5, the G8, as the fifth biggest economy in the world. The British Prime Minister – and we will find out in July who will take over from Prime Minister May – is the UN Secretary General's resilience champion, and will co-host the Secretary General's Climate Action Summit in September.

The UK is also bidding to host COP26, in 2020, in partnership with Italy. We are well placed to be committed, ambitious and effective hosts. And – if successful – we will deliver a robust agenda to support the mitigation and adaptation challenges facing Small Island Developing States.

Oceans

My third and final theme is Oceans. It was not for nothing that early European explorers referred to the islands of Samoa as the Navigator Islands: it takes one to know one. We are all seafaring nations, by and of the sea. And when I was at the Conference of the Pacific Community two weeks ago, delegate after delegate – from the Prime Minister Puna of the Cook Islands, to Deputy Prime Minister Fiame of Samoa, to the Foreign Ministers of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands – talked about how the oceans are central to their way of life, to their economy and wellbeing – and about the critical task of protecting those oceans now and in the future.

So what are we doing on Oceans? The UK provides over £90 million of funds to two Commonwealth oceans programmes that directly benefit the Pacific. The first is the Commonwealth Marine Economies Programme, which supports 17 Commonwealth small island developing countries in the Pacific and Caribbean in identifying the potential of their marine economies in a sustainable, resilient, and integrated way. The intention here is to promote growth, innovation, jobs, and investment whilst safeguarding healthy seas and ecosystems.

The second is the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance, which is part of the Commonwealth Blue Charter action group and is jointly led by the UK and Vanuatu. The Alliance consists of a group of countries who pledged ambitious actions to reduce plastic pollution.

The Clean Oceans Alliance encourages members to commit to one of the following:

- Banning the sale and manufacture of microbeads in cosmetic and personal care products;
- Significantly reduce the number of single-use plastic carrier bags;
- Take steps to eliminate all avoidable single-use plastic waste.

Over 20 countries have pledged to this alliance so far. And as I sat at the table at the Pacific Community, country after country talked about their plans to ban or restrict the use of single use plastics. We all share the

same goals.

We also want to do all we can to harness thought leadership in the region. So it's good news for all of us that the University of the South Pacific won a new 5 year £1.6 million UK research grant and will partner with other world leading research centres in studying the urgent challenges facing our oceans.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in addition to being the British High Commissioner to New Zealand and Samoa, I am also the Governor of the Pitcairn Islands. Pitcairn is the smallest and most remote of the members of the Pacific Community. Situated in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, two days away by boat from the nearest other human settlement, it has just 50 inhabitants. But despite its size and isolation, it is deeply committed to playing its part in protecting our oceans, and has a Marine Protected area of 835,000km².

But Henderson Island, one of the three uninhabited Pitcairn Islands, has the dubious accolade of having the highest density of plastic pollution anywhere in the world. So last month we sent a scientific expedition to Henderson Island, focused on clearing up the plastic, studying it and its impact on the environment, setting up cameras to monitor plastic pollution build up and impact, and highlighting the plight of plastic pollution to the wider world. The pictures are truly shocking. But we hope that both the science – and the images – will help galvanize cultural change in how we consume and manage plastic waste.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen we are living in interesting times. The tectonic plates of geopolitics are shifting under our feet – here in the Pacific as indeed they are elsewhere. There is a growing consensus – though not yet universal – of the existential challenge of climate change, and the pollution of our seas. But we are in the foothills of efforts to tackle those challenges. Economic, climate and political resilience are more important than ever – and nowhere more than in the Small Island Developing States of the Pacific.

So that is why the UK is increasing its presence and engagement in the region. We want to bring our power, influence and expertise to bear, and we want to work in partnership with our friends in the Pacific, on the basis of our shared values, as we all seek – urgently – to protect and preserve this beautiful world that we live in.

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.